

# Hypoxia in the Gulf—Who's Problem Is It?

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## Abstract

**T**he Mississippi River basin drains over 40 percent of the land area of the United States. The Gulf of Mexico, into which the Mississippi flows, also supports approximately 40 percent of the fishery landings for our country. An area of low oxygen concentration, termed a hypoxia region, has been documented in the Gulf. This conference is being held to present and review the technical realities of the problem and to bring together all interested parties for discussions and education.

This presentation will remind the participants that we actually know very little about a potentially big problem. Further, those states that believe that they have no responsibilities toward the Gulf because they are far away, are misinformed. The problems that manifest themselves off the coast of Louisiana are national problems that will require study and change in many upriver states. The forum under which this study and resultant work will be done is equally important to the future of the environmental protection business. The non-enforcement, non-threatening aspects of this study/program are being looked upon as a measure of the environmental maturity in this country. Those that believe the change can occur without threats must be active in this program.

## Introduction

The technical issues related to the depleted oxygen area in the Gulf of Mexico have recently been

catalogued to present a more detailed explanation of this phenomenon. Recommendations have followed which express the need for more detailed studies about cause and effect and the development of appropriate control measures. Since this seasonal problem, however big and however serious it finally turns out to be, exists off of the coast of Louisiana, people might assume that this is Louisiana's problem alone. Nothing could be further from the truth. I will attempt to outline in general detail, why the problem is of national concern rather than simply a single state issue. I will also provide support of a multi-state, federal and citizen partnership as the tool for solving, or at least mitigating this problem.

The problem of having a very large area of low oxygen in a normally productive area of the Gulf of Mexico has both environmental and economic implications. What we do not know about this situation is greater than what we do know however. Speaking from a policy perspective, it is sometimes very difficult not to do something before all of the facts are known. We, as policy managers, are often subjected to varying amounts of outside pressure to take steps that are designed to solve simple problems. The fact that most of the issues we have to deal with are not simple, but rather, are quite complex does not seem to deter the "you must do something now" voices. That is one of the issues that this conference must address over these next two days. How do we design short term, intermediate and long term remedies of the problem? First we must be able to describe what the problem actually is. We can describe the manifestations of the hypoxia problem.

In fact, the name adequately describes the impact. Low oxygenated waters. This does not however, describe the cause or causes of the hypoxic area. We are all certain that nutrient loadings are one of the primary contributors to the hypoxia problem, but we also know that some level of nutrient loading is necessary to sustain the productivity of the Gulf ecosystem. What we do not know is how much nutrient loading is enough or how much is too much. We do not know when we reached the point of over supply of these nutrients nor are we certain of how long the hypoxic region has existed. In short, we know there is a problem, but beyond that we are guessing about the relative contributions of each factor. I make these observations as a political appointee, not as a biologist or a fisheries expert.

What are the implications of this problem? We often speak of sustainable development and using our natural resources wisely. Killing a large area of the Gulf every year can not be considered responsible stewardship by even the most indifferent polluter. The question is not whether we must address this issue, it is how we must address it. As the Secretary of the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality, I am obligated by state statutes to protect human health and the environment in my state. How do I protect the environment of my state when the problem is not created in or by my state? How do we as states, who by the way are demanding that the federal government get off of our backs and let us regulate our states, handle interstate transport problems? These are the questions that this conference must also address.

From a single state regulator's perspective this problem can be viewed as a measure of our nation's environmental protection system maturity. Our challenge is how to contact, work with, and when necessary, modify existing practices carried out in multiple states. The question is whether we can accomplish such a task in a voluntary or prescriptive manner. I do not know the answer to this question. I do know

that if we states continue to demand autonomy, or the U.S. Congress in its wisdom gives us that autonomy and we fail to use this freedom of action wisely, we will have failed in our charge to effect positive change in the current command and control system we say we dislike. The problems we face in the Gulf are real. The solutions that we may have to implement will require a level of communication, study and action that we have heretofor only thought about. Can we cooperate when a state may have to change how its citizens work, farm or handle waste, and not see any appreciable environmental improvement in that state? This is the real question that we all must face. This will be hard, this will create political challenges to all of the regulatory agencies involved. But let us return to the basic issue. Something is wrong. We have to find out just what we have to fix and then we have to fix it. This will take time, lots of money and a positive attitude that the "fixes" we propose will work. This brings to mind the famous quote from the American revolution, "Gentlemen, we will all hang together, or most assuredly we will hang separately." This is what we face. A multi-state cause, a local effect and a national impact. How we as states handle this issue may frame how environmental controls and regulatory compliance are managed into the twenty-first century. We must, I believe, face this reality of our plight with open eyes, with a willingness to change and a clear recognition that some very tough decisions will most likely be part of any control solution we impose.

## **Presentation Discussion**

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No questions/discussion after Secretary Kucharksi.